

## Assessment of the level of the marketing orientation of touroperators on the European market

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### Abstract

The paper will discuss the implementation of the marketing concept for the activities of touroperators. The issues of the essence of marketing orientation and the phase of its development will be presented. Next, the place of touroperators on the tourist market and issues related to the shaping of marketing orientation by tour operators will be indicated. The links of entities in the system of creating marketing orientation on the touroperator market and factors that determine it will be discussed. The methodology and results of research on the level of marketing orientation of touroperators operating in Poland and selected countries of the European Union will be presented. The research was conducted in the second half of 2016 through questionnaire surveys. The research covered 204 touroperators from Poland and 176 from selected European countries. The objective of this study is to present the concept of the marketing orientation of touroperators as well as indicate elements determining the level of market orientation which stem from relationships of a touroperator with other participants of this market.

**Keywords:** marketing, marketing orientation, touroperator market, touroperator, European market

### Introduction

An important element of the tourism market determining the effects of the remaining entities of this market is the touroperator market. Touroperators are entities functioning under highly competitive conditions and therefore strongly support their own activities with marketing instruments. The implementation of the marketing concept to company activities lead to adopting marketing orientation which enables achieving a long-term competitive advantage. Taking into consideration the position of touroperators in the tourism market structure, that is between partial tourism service providers and sales agents and final consumers, and simultaneously this highly competitive market in the global conditions, it is deemed that touroperators are characterized by a high level of marketing orientation. The objective of this study is to present the concept of the marketing orientation of touroperators as well as indicate elements determining the level of market orientation which stem from relationships of a touroperator with other participants of this

market. Moreover, the article also includes the research findings of the assessment of the level of the market orientation on touroperators functioning in Poland and selected European Union countries. This is a theoretical and empirical study. Such research methods were applied as a critical analysis of literature on the subject, logical operations and statistical methods.

### The essence and stages of marketing orientation development

Marketing orientation is the effect of understanding, acceptance and internalization of the rules of marketing management in a given organization (i.e. adopting the rules to its organizational structure) [7]. In literature, the term marketing orientation is often associated and/or connected with other terms: market orientation, customer orientation, competitive orientation [15, 28].

The interpretation of marketing orientation can be conducted by presenting views on marketing development. The impact of changing conditions on the emergence and development of marketing [5] can be presented with consecutive stages (phases). On the one hand, these stages show the historical evolution of marketing, but on the other hand they refer to the stages of company development which marketing adopts for the purposes of its activities. Taking account of many views on the development of marketing, six stages can be distinguished, i.e.:

- production orientation,
- product orientation,
- sales orientation,
- market (marketing, traditional marketing) orientation,
- strategic marketing orientation,
- social orientation (social responsibility, social marketing) [1, 2, 3, 4, 11, 14, 21].

In literature, there is a general agreement on the evolution of companies' orientation which due to various conditions, including competition [12], are subject to constant transformations. Marketing orientation, which reflects producers' interest in consumer needs, is conducted through the integration of production and trade in marketing activities [24]. Market research is also effectively used and constitutes the basis for making decisions and introducing marketing management in a company. The most significant task is to determine needs and demands of the target market

as well as to adopt a company so that means of fulfilling consumer needs are provided in a more effective, efficient and competitive manner [10].

### **Touropoperator as the tourism market entity**

Travel agencies are specialized companies organizing and being intermediaries in the sales of tourism services [16]. To simplify, travel agencies include two types of the tourism market entities, i.e. tour operators and travel intermediaries working for them.

A touropoperator is a company which purchases, as a rule on a massive scale, partial tourism services, which are then included in packages for a given tourism event [29]. The company works on its own behalf, on its own account and assumes the risk resulting from possible failure to sell the offer to clients. The package comprising partial services is sold to clients as its own product. Therefore, the tour operator is liable towards the client for the proper provision of services. A tour operator earns through a mark-up (margin) resulting from the settlements with the providers of partial services.

Although on the present tourism market there are travel agencies that combine in their activities the provision of organization and intermediary services, some of the national markets due to strong competition are forced to make these companies specialize, what results in a visible division into travel organizers and intermediaries.

A special position of tour operators on the tourism market results from functions performed for the producers of partial tourism services and consumers of tourism packages [9] as well as business relationships of tour operators with travel agencies and the fact that they deal with package offers on remote markets (tourist destinations). It determines certain market activities of these entities and directly affects marketing orientation.

### **Marketing orientation of touropoperators**

Marketing activities of the entities from the tour operator market are dynamic, dependent on the market conditions, changes in consumption patterns and state regulatory decisions. It means that tour operators and entities cooperating with them need to adapt to the changeable market situation. The marketing concept used by a tour operator is subject to evolution similar as in other economic areas [22]. An essential element of the specific marketing activities of tour operators is a consumer understood in a broad sense. The consumer of touropoperator services is not only a final user (tourist), but also the providers of partial services who reach consumers with their offers through to a travel package created by a touropoperator. Therefore, a touropoperator provides services to the providers of partial services in the form of travel package organization. The position of tour operators in the process of tourism service distribution also affects their method of developing marketing orientation.

Furthermore, it should be also noted that tour operators predominantly deal with outbound tourism movement.

Travel agencies offering travel packages participate in creating the tourism offer of many tourist destinations located outside a direct region of these entities' activities. Therefore, they are multi-organizers for external tourist destinations [20].

The adoption of marketing orientation by a tour operator requires special attention in terms of the development of the price-product quality relationship [27]. A fundamental condition that has to be met in order to make activities connected with creating the price-quality relationship successful is thinking in line with consumers and their needs, as well as the possibility of capturing the difference between usefulness in offer classes. The effect of activities aiming to create marketing orientation is achieving a high level of the quality assessment of the offered products from consumers, that is the so-called perceived quality [25]. Such a measure type is the customer satisfaction level [13]. It is measured on the basis of market research using various techniques of collecting information and evaluating results [26]. In terms of the travel agency offers, the measurement should concern the whole offer in the form of a travel package. The assessment of service quality depends primarily on clients' expectations and their satisfaction with the consumed service is equal to fulfilled expectations. Measuring customer satisfaction is a starting point for enhancing the system of touropoperator's activities [18].

The issue of the marketing orientation of touropoperators is based on the corresponding concept of marketing development stages as in the case of the remaining market entities. It should be emphasised that the activities of companies improving their orientation addressed to consumers and the entire market at the first three stages, i.e. production, product and sales, are the components of traditional marketing orientation. Activities created at the strategic marketing and social responsibility stages attempt to develop marketing (market) orientation understood in a traditional way. Therefore, the term marketing orientation collectively includes elements resulting from particular stages of marketing development. The aim of the exemplification of the listed stages is to highlight the fact that marketing is dynamic, which means that it adapts to changeable market conditions and takes account of company activities and its environment.

### **Relationships in the system of marketing orientation of touropoperators**

A touropoperator is an entity which independently decides about marketing orientation, setting its own market objectives and the method of influencing the market, including a consumer [23]. Taking account of the place of a tour operator in the performance of functions on the tourism service market, it should be highlighted that the following entities affect touropoperator's marketing orientation:

- a) consumers - purchasing offers in the form of travel packages (individuals, institutions),
- b) partial service providers - being a special group of consumers whose services reach consumers through

- travel packages,
- c) tour operator service intermediaries (travel intermediaries) - constituting a link of direct contact with a client purchasing a travel package,
- d) tourist destinations - places where tour operators direct their consumers; destinations where tourism services are directly consumed,
- e) competitors - having their own competitive methods of reaching consumers as well as a specific level of marketing orientation,
- f) entities regulating the market - whose activities directly or indirectly affect the marketing orientation level of touroperators.

### **Factors affecting marketing orientation of touroperators**

In addition to the issues connected with entities which influence the level of marketing orientation of touroperators, one should also indicate the market structural factors mainly of an official and organizational character:

- a) the touroperator market development stage, in a country where a tour operator is registered,
- b) the combination or separation of the functions concerning travel organization or travel intermediaries by a specific touroperator entity,
- c) the market scale of touroperators' activities - servicing the local, regional, domestic, continental, global markets,
- d) the specialization of tour operators focusing on a specifically defined market,
- e) the marketing orientation of partial service providers in tourist destinations,
- f) dominating sales technology (traditional, online),
- g) the regulatory intensity [19].

### **Methodology for marketing orientation research of touroperators**

An attempt to comprehensively study marketing orientation of touroperators is a complex and multiphase task. The inspiration for this part of the research was studies characterizing marketing orientation in a quantitative manner which appeared in the 1990s [6, 7, 8, 17]. In these works, the measurement was conducted through surveys addressed to companies where managers assessed particular elements affecting marketing orientation of their companies on a 7- or 5-point Likert scale (from 15 to 32 items) grouped into relevant areas. Marketing orientation was estimated as the average (or weighted average) of responses to given questions. For the purposes of estimating the level of marketing orientation of tour operators in Poland and in 10 selected European countries, the research was conducted in the following phases:

Phase 1 - preparation of the research.

Phase 2 - expert method.

Phase 3 - pilot research.

Phase 4 - full-scale research.

Phase 5 - interpretation of the research results.

Phase 6 - assessment of the results (diagnosis), recommendations.

The first research phase involved building a database of tour operators for countries where marketing orientation was measured. The assumed size was 4,000 addresses with 10% response rate (400 surveys). During this phase, however, 3,828 e-mail addresses of touroperators from 11 countries were established and collected. These addresses were used to send survey forms in the next part of the research. This phase also involved devising an initial version of the survey questionnaire. To this end, like in the case of the earlier authors [6, 7, 8], several dozen statements were devised which should measure the marketing orientation of touroperators.

Then, this set was provided for assessment to twelve experts dealing with marketing, market research and the tourism market. The experts assessed the compatibility and correctness of the statement on a four-level scale; they could also put forward their comments and proposals for the questionnaire content. On the basis of experts' suggestions about the questionnaire structure, the statements which received a score equal or higher than the median were chosen. Additionally, the survey was assessed by two focus groups consisting of economics and tourism graduates having at least two-year professional experience in the tourism industry. The prepared questionnaire was again given to the experts for assessment. None of the experts raised any objections to the devised survey. The next, third phase involved the additional verification of the form by means of the pilot research. The survey was handed over to twenty travel agencies whose task was to complete it. None of them submitted any comments on the survey content.

After the expert consultations and the pilot research, the survey form comprised 44 questions grouped into 9 thematic areas:

1. Orientation of a travel agency towards clients' needs (5 particular issues were assessed).
2. Communication in a travel agency (6).
3. Response of a travel agency to changes in their environment (7).
4. Implementation of changes appropriately to the market response (6).
5. Management of a travel agency (3).
6. Orientation to the incentive scheme (4).
7. People's sense of identification with a travel agency (6).
8. Market turbulence (4).
9. Intensity of competition (3).

Within every area, each of 44 questions was put on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 meant 'definitely not', whereas 5 meant 'definitely yes'. With the form structured in such a way, the assessment of the marketing orientation of a touroperator constituted a construct measured by all questions. Adopting such an approach meant the necessity to verify a problem concerning evaluation whether the scale measured exactly this phenomenon which was given to the respondents to assess and which it was supposed to measure. In order to establish it, it was required to indicate various aspects of the scale relevance, determine the scale accuracy in terms of actual diversification of the studied phenomenon,

that is to verify the scale reliability.

## Basic information on the tour operators participating in the research

The survey questionnaire was designed in three language versions and it was mainly sent by electronic means. For the purpose of research, a Google module was used to send the survey questionnaire to touroperators in Poland and 10 selected European countries with the highest Index of Economic Freedom in 2015 (i.e. Switzerland, Ireland, Estonia, the UK, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg, Finland, Sweden), what was the fourth research phase. The request for completing the form was sent to in total 3,828 travel agencies. In Poland as well as other countries there was some difficulty receiving the expected number of responses (400). Due to a low response rate, the surveys were sent again (over 6,200 emails) and it was decided that there was a need to go to the studied countries in order to reach the representatives of travel organizers personally. Therefore, some responses are the results of personal interviews. The research was conducted from March to November 2016. Ultimately, 204 correctly completed forms from Poland and 176 from other European countries involved in the research were received.

The effect of the research was the collection of 380 correctly completed survey questionnaires. There were slightly more completed surveys from Poland (54%) than from the remaining European countries (46%).

Among the studied touroperators, a dominating group consisted of micro-enterprises employing up to 9 employees in total. Such companies constituted slightly over 70% of respondents, whereas together with small enterprises it was the total of around 93%. Companies employing over 250 employees constituted only around 2% of respondents. It should be noted that the structure of tour operators in terms of their size (the number of employees) obtained during the research corresponds to the actual structure of the entities of the tour operator market in the European countries. A dominating group of travel organizers are micro- and small enterprises.

## The research on the level of marketing orientation of touroperators

After analysing the structure of the studied touroperators, the main research part was started, that is an attempt to determine the level of the marketing orientation of touroperators functioning on the European market. This objective was achieved on the basis of the conducted research on each touroperator. On that basis, the level of the market orientation on touroperators in Poland and the selected European countries was established.

The average level of the marketing orientation of tour operators in total was 166.82 pts, whereas the maximum level was 204 pts and the minimal one 100 pts. Statistically, the average level of the marketing orientation of touroperators with a 95% probability should be between 165

and 169 pts. Variation in terms of the marketing orientation of touroperators among the studied countries can be deemed low (the coefficient of variation CV was 11.16) [23].

With the criterion of the value of the average marketing orientation of touroperators, Table 1 presents countries starting with those which represent the highest level of marketing orientation.

Table 1. Countries acc. to the average level of marketing orientation of touroperators (MOT).

Country	MOT (average) pts
Switzerland	175.25
United Kingdom	175.00
Sweden	171.14
Finland	171.00
Ireland	171.00
Netherlands	170.00
Estonia	169.83
Poland	168.20
Germany	158.28
Denmark	157.00
Luxembourg	156.20

Source: own work on the basis of the research on touroperators in particular countries.

According to the information presented in Table 1, the country with the highest level of marketing orientation among the studied touroperators was Switzerland (175.25 pts), whereas the lowest level of marketing orientation among the entities of the tour operator market was observed in Luxembourg (156.2 pts). The analysis of the data from Table 1 implies that the marketing orientation of Polish touroperators participating in the research is average. Despite that, due to touroperators from Germany, Denmark and Luxembourg which considerably lowered the average for the studied European countries, the average level of the marketing orientation of Polish touroperators is higher than in the case of touroperators from the remaining countries in total.

To extend the research, the concept of measurement was devised and it was called a synthetic indicator of marketing orientation of touroperators (siMOT). In order to construct it, thematic areas, into which 44 questions from the survey form were grouped, were used. Data normalization resulted in vectors with values between <0, 1> for particular 380 touroperators in 11 studied countries across 9 thematic areas.

For the marketing orientation of touroperators estimated in such a way, the level of siMOT for touroperators in all 11 analysed countries was in total 0.538, including 0.558 for Poland and 0.515 for the remaining European countries. The marketing orientation of touroperators in Poland is on average slightly higher than of touroperators from the remaining countries. Nevertheless, these differences seem to be of little significance, which is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The average levels of the Synthetic Indicator of Marketing Orientation of Touroperators acc. to the analysed



countries

Country	siMOT (average)
United Kingdom	0,667
Switzerland	0,639
Poland	0,558
Netherlands	0,556
Ireland	0,556
Finland	0,556
Estonia	0,556
Denmark	0,500
Sweden	0,492
Luxembourg	0,489
Germany	0,455

Source: own work on the basis of the research on touroperators in particular countries

Comparing the results obtained for the synthetic indicator (siMOT) from Table 2 with the results from Table 1, it can be observed that after normalizing and recoding variables, Polish touroperators are on the third position in the ranking of countries with the strongest marketing orientation. The differences between Polish tour operators and the next touroperators from other countries on the list are insignificant.

## Conclusions

The conducted research show that marketing orientation and factors determining it can be subject to assessment by means of measurable quantitative criteria. Therefore, it is possible to estimate the level of marketing orientation and establish it according to a scale.

Regardless of the marketing orientation of touroperators addressed to final consumers of services (tourists), it should be noted that there is a necessity to build a proper level of marketing orientation of touroperators with regard to:

- partial service providers,
- sales agencies (travel intermediaries).

As it was mentioned before, the first group of entities is a special recipient of touroperator services. Touroperators should aim for the selection of partial service providers who are highly client-oriented and simultaneously offer them cooperation focusing on a marketing approach to their market needs. The marketing approach of tour operators is also expected in terms of travel agencies which represent them before their consumers. It is essential that the offers of touroperators striving to obtain a high level of marketing orientation are available in travel agencies' points of sale, following similar marketing principles as touroperators.

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